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HD **AFLOAT IN AN EXOTIC WILDERNESS**

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LP

It was the silence that made the noise so

captivating. Our little canoe floated

TD

slowly down the Vermelho River and, as

dusk began turning ivy-covered trees

into menacing silhouettes, the world around us came alive.

Fat dorados and pacus heaved out of the muddy water to announce themselves with splashes. Hidden rustles in the overgrown river banks suggested hungry Yacare caimans (alligatorlike creatures) or, more imaginatively, preying jaguars. And in the air, birds of all shapes and sizes and colors competed with calls and cries.

On one tree, angry kingfishers struggled to chase away a yellow-beaked toucan that seemed intent on raiding their nests. On another, two huge jabiru storks stood guard on a home of twigs four feet in dimension, watching nonchalantly as nearby branches filled with hawks. Above us, a woodpecker knocked loudly for attention.

A few days, even a few moments of traveling by boat through Brazil's Pantanal suffice to turn the most hardened city dweller into a convinced naturalist. The 80,000-square-mile inner delta that covers the very heart of South America is the refuge for the most prolific wildlife to be found on the continent. For an ornithologist, it is where textbook drawings of exotic species take flight. For a fisherman, it is where big ones do not get away. For a tourist, it is a memorable discovery.

Access is the key to the Pantanal. Until not many years ago, the area of southwestern Brazil that borders on Paraguay and Bolivia was unreachable to all but explorers, its flora and fauna both hidden and protected by isolation. Today the area is gradually opening up. Its tourist facilities are still rustic, although its two principal cities - Corumba and Cuiaba - are now connected to the rest of Brazil by road, train and plane.

But this access is creating new problems. Most of the new arrivals are not tourists, but farmers, miners and poachers who are drawn by the dream of a fortune and not by the ideal of conservation. Could the very process of development that will make tourism more comfortable here turn the Pantanal into a more hostile environment for wildlife?

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The retreating frontier of Nature is no longer a novelty. The stories now being told in this region of illegal hunting, uncontrolled land-clearing and pollution of rivers have already been heard in Africa and Asia and, before that, in the United States and Europe. But they contain a moral: the Pantanal may have looked finer a decade ago, it is still extraordinary today, and it will certainly carry more scars 10 years hence. The sooner it is visited, the better.

The area, the world's largest wetland, comprises a single low-lying ecosystem, formed by the dozens of rivers that flow into the Paraguay River. The Pantanal - from the word pantano, meaning swamp in both Spanish and Portuguese - is in fact a misnomer because, depending on the season, the area is either flooded or dries out to expose vast expanses of savannas. But it is the constant ebb and flow of the waters that keep it alive.

For bird watching, the best time is the dry season between July and October when migrant birds flock here for nesting. On the relatively few trees that stand above the shrubbery, the competition for space is intense. Herons, macaws, finches, kites, ducks, ibises and more - at least 300 species from 45 "families" of birds have been spotted - may all nest together, turning arid branches into a marketplace of noise, color and bustle.

The birds, of course, come for a reason. As the annual flood recedes, it leaves hundreds of lagoons crowded with fish that provide the food for the newly hatched offspring. It is then, for example, that the piranha, rampant throughout the Pantanal, turns victim, plucked out of the water by storks and other long-billed birds. A good lens and a little patience are all that are needed to capture such moments.

Fishing is good between January and July, but best in April and May when the flooded rivers return to their courses. The prize fighter is the dorado, a golden - and tasty - tropical fish that can weigh up to 20 pounds and will average at least 10 pounds. Stories - not tales - are told that it can break a 100- pound line with its initial lunge for freedom and, because most rivers lack the space needed to play it to exhaustion, it will often put up the struggle of a much larger saltwater fish.

Other fish are as varied and strange as their names: pacu, surubim, giripoca, piavu,cu, piraputanga, pintado, pirancajuva and piapara. And then there are those piranhas, the tiny sharp-toothed stars of horror films and myriad legends. They are hungriest - and most dangerous - during the dry season, although human victims are rare. To preserve the piranha's image, however, boatmen will often cut open a fish and toss it overboard so that visitors can watch aghast as the water churns savagely beside them.

Caimans are less fearsome than they look and, while many can still be seen sunning themselves on embankments or peeping above the water line, they are fighting a losing battle against poachers. Brazilian authorities try to control the practice, but the area is too large and resources too few for effective patrolling. As a result, literally millions of caimans have already been killed, their skins then smuggled over the border to Paraguay or Bolivia for re-export.

So fragile is the Pantanal's ecosystem that this hunting unavoidably creates new problems. The caiman plays a crucial role in controlling the piranha population which, in some areas, is now growing rapidly. As more piranhas need to find food, they begin to deplete the stock of other tropical fish that themselves provide food for many birds. Once again, irreversible damage has not yet taken place, but a trend has been established.

In the case of jaguars, however, a more serious problem already exists. Deer, capybaras, tapirs, iguanas and wild pigs still frequently wander near roads, while monkeys and otters play near rivers, but the jaguar, the largest cat in South America, has been hunted to the point that a sighting is now a rarity. Guides will point to wooded hillsides as refuges of surviving jaguars, but even these areas will be invaded by farmers if any of their cattle are killed.

Precisely because the Pantanal is not a swamp, however, one of its strongest features is its constant life cycle. The waters begin to rise in the north while nesting is ending in the south, and then, as flooding of 18 to 20 feet moves south, the birds fly to the head of the rivers in the north and follow the drying out process towards the south.

A visit to the Pantanal over the New Year thus provided two very different images of the region. We flew first by commercial airline to Corumba and, after one night at a hotel overlooking the Paraguay River, took a surprisingly comfortable three-hour train ride to the southwest. The Pantanal immediately opened up on both sides of the track, with hawks and herons frequently flying at eye level beside the train. At Carandazal,

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a modern looking station in the middle of nowhere, we were met and driven one hour along a dusty track to the Cabana do Lontra, a hotel on the Miranda River.

In this region of the Pantanal, the rivers were rising but had not yet flooded, and many birds - though not nearly as many as three months earlier - were still in evidence. None is more impressive than the jabiru stork, known locally by the wonderful name of tuiuiu, with its black and scarlet collar, spindly legs, huge beak and six-foot wingspan. It is the largest stork in the New World and appears to be thriving in the Pantanal. I cannot claim to have identified the great variety of other storks and herons that stood silently on embankments or swept low over the rivers, but one guidebook named 15 species in the region.

Similarly, a listing of all the other birds that kept making cameo appearances on our fishing trips up the Miranda and Vermelho Rivers cannot convey the feeling of sheer marvel that they created. A pair of bright red macaws, a flock of ducks, the ever-present kingfishers, the darting visits of the red-crested cardinal, the song of the flycatcher, known in Portuguese as the bem-te-vi, a phonetic rendering of its call. But much of the pleasure came from seeing many birds for the first time.

The fishing seemed secondary, perhaps because it was so effortless. For those who come without their own tackle, bamboo rods, nylon wire, a hefty hook and bait are provided by the handful of hotels that operate in this part of the Pantanal. The boatmen who operate the motor-powered canoes seem to know where to go to pull in a half-dozen six- or seven- pounders during an afternoon. But this, we were reminded, is the off-season: at the right time of the year, the canoe may be weighed down by l00 or even 200 pounds of fish when it heads back at dusk.

From this area, we returned to Corumba and then flew - again by commercial airliner - to Cuiaba, from there driving south to the town of Barao de Melga,co. Then came a one-hour boat trip to the Pousada do Barao, a tiny, six-room eco-hotel, as the conservationist owners call it. Here even fishing is considered slightly non-U: the idea is simply to enjoy nature.

The area was by then flooded, creating vast lakes and opening up narrow canals through thick undergrowth. Some birds and plenty of caimans were still around, while dorado and surubim appeared dutifully on the dining table. But this was clearly the season when the Pantanal renews itself, when the water brings life to the land and the land provides the rivers with minerals. It is even possible to swim in "piranha-infested waters" without fear: the little blighters are well fed at that time of year and therefore not hungry.

The ideal time to visit the Pantanal, then, is somewhere between April and October. It will still show different faces in different areas, but wildlife is at its most visible at that time. Getting to the delta is also no problem since daily flights connect cities.

This is no luxury safari. The hotels in the Pantanal are in the main simple - with fans, for example, though without air-conditioning - and their food is homely. Yet they are adequate as well as appropriate. After all, to get closer to nature should mean shaking off a bit of development. And how else could one hope to see macaws and caimans and monkeys a few yards from the front entrance?

VISITING A BRAZILIAN WILDERNESS

Making Arrangements Varig, the Brazilian airline, can book hotel rooms in the Pantanal, working through travel agencies in Brazil. The Brazilian Tourism Authority (60 East 42d Street, New York, N.Y. 10165; 212-286-9600) can provide information on the region. Thus, an entire package can be put together in New York.

In Brazil, Vasp has daily flights from Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo to both Corumba and Cuiaba. Varig and Cruzeiro do Sul fly to Cuiaba daily. Hotels in Corumba Two good choices are Pousada do Cachimbo (4 Rua Guapore, Corumba, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil; telephone 231-4833), where a double is $20, including breakfast, and Hotel Beira Rio (109 Rua Manoel Cavassa, Corumba; 255-6213), where a double is $22, with breakfast. Hotels Near Corumba Several hotels in the Pantanal are reachable from Corumba.

Cabana do Lontra (Estrada Miranda-Corumba, Pantanal do Mato Grosso, Brazil; 241-2406), southeast of Corumba on the Miranda River, is reachable by train and car. It has small rooms with four beds apiece. The cost is $20 a night a person, including all meals. Fishing boats accommodating three people may be rented for $35 a day; tackle is provided.

At Cabana do Pescador (Estrada Aquidauana-Bonito, Pantanal do Mato Grosso; 241-3697), a fishing hotel outside the Pantanal, a double is $40, including all meals.

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Fazenda Santa Clara (Corumba, Mato Grosso do Sul; 231-5797), a few miles from the Miranda River, offers horseback riding, fishing and tours of the Pantanal. A four-day package that includes transportation to and from Corumba by train and car and a boat trip is $108 a person.

Pesqueiro do Severino (Corumba, Mato Grosso do Sul; 231-1531) is a larger hotel with air-conditioned rooms that are $18 a person, including all meals. The cost of a boat with a guide is $25 a person a day.

Pesqueiro do Taruma (Corumba, Mato Grosso do Sul; telephone 578- 1627 in Sao Paolo), on the banks of the Paraguay River about 50 miles from Corumba, is a rustic-looking hotel with a tennis court and swimming pool. The cost is $30 a person a night. Hotels in Cuiaba Modern hotels in Cuiaba include Hotel Aurea Palace (63 Avenida General Melo, Cuiaba, Mato Grosso; 322- 3637), where a double is $38, including breakfast, and Hotel Excelsior (46 Avenida Getulio Vargas, Cuiaba; 322- 6322), where a double is $40, including breakfast. Hotels Near Cuiaba Several hotels in the Pantanal are reachable from Cuiaba.

Pousada do Barao (Barao de Melga,co, Mato Grosso; telephone 257-7773 in Rio), on Sia Mariana Bay in the heart of the Pantanal, is reachable by taking a car to Barao de Melga,co and then proceeding by boat. A five-day package including all meals, transportation to and from Cuiaba and boat trips is $378 a person.

Pousada do Pantanal (Corumba, Mato Grosso do Sul, 231-1460) offers chalets that are $66 a night for a couple, including all meals but excluding boat trips.

Santa Rosa Pantanal (Rodovia Transpantaneiro, Cuiaba, Mato Grosso; 321-6719) is 200 miles south of Cuiaba at Porto Jofre. A four-day package, including transportation to and from Cuiaba, all meals and 12 hours of boat trips, is $650 a person Boat Hotels Paturi Real leaves from Porto Cercado, 85 miles from Cuiaba, for a four- day round-trip to Corumba through rivers and lakes, with stops for fishing and sightseeing. The craft, which is comfortable and has air-conditioning, is usually chartered by groups of eight. The cost is $1,600 a day for the group.

Cidade Barao de Melga,co, a new boat expected to begin operating in June, will offer six-day package tours through the Pantanal starting in either Corumba or Barao de Melga,co. It is to accommodate 19 passengers in eight cabins. The cost is $60 a person a day, including side trips for fishing and photographing.

In both cases, arrangements may be made through a travel agent. What to Pack Everything is informal in the Pantanal. Visitors should pack a hat, sun oil and, in July or August, a sweater. Perhaps the only essential item is insect repellent because mosquitoes are plentiful. Some visitors might feel more secure starting antimalaria medication and having a yellow fever vaccination before leaving home, although neither disease has been reported in the area for some years. Cameras and binoculars are recommended. Only serious fishermen need worry about bringing their own tackle. Those who want to keep up with the world might take a shortwave radio. A. R.

Photos of Pantanal wildlife; Map of Pantanal region

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